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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Rockefeller Foundation's partnership with the Comer School Development Program (SDP), a dissemination effort aimed at sharing the SDP message and implementation strategies. Foundation support began in 1990 for what was perceived as the most promising and proven schoolwide improvement method for low-income communities. To support dissemination efforts, the Comer Project for Change in Education (CPCE) was created to provide training in SDP program principles and processes. Two new dissemination strategies were launched in 1994: (1) an intensification of the program within three districts, and (2) the creation of three regional development centers. The foundation struggled with questions of how best to evaluate the effectiveness of information dissemination strategies. Because the program was unique in its aim to promote restructuring through dissemination, rather than replication, the focus of the evaluation was on the effectiveness of "how to" videos and partnerships. An external consulting firm was chosen to conduct the evaluation because it recognized the need for flexibility, a key element in program implementation and evaluation. (LMI)

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PHILANTHROPY AND SCHOOL REFORM: THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION'S ROLE IN DISSEMINATING AND EVALUATING COMER'S SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

prepared by Marian E. Bass and Marla Ucelli

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I. The Foundation's Approach to School Reform

In 1989, the trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation approved the creation of a program in School Reform. Although the Foundation's grantmaking had included education and educators in various ways for many years, both the title and timing of "School Reform" were deliberate. As the title implied, the program would focus on schools --the one institution encountered by virtually all the nation's youth. Linking to long-standing concerns of the Foundation's Equal Opportunity program, the focus would be narrowed to urban youth. The timing of School Reform's inception coincided with the end of a decade marked by increasing attention to, concern about, and reform of public education. In brief, the Foundation's staff believed that a new school reform program area would be better positioned to focus on improving urban public schools so that disadvantaged, minority, and immigrant youth will possess the competencies needed for full economic and social integration into society. The decision to launch the program and its initial grantmaking strategy were rooted in an analysis of the state of urban education and the reform picture as it was taken a little more than five years after the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*.

At the program's inception the Foundation was attempting to leverage what was then a $5 million annual School Reform investment in a universe of more than 80,000 public school buildings where more than $230 billion was being spent on K-12 education. The Rockefeller Foundation, not unique among large national philanthropies, identifies areas of human and social need and proactively targets programs to address them. Given the limited size of our purse in relation to the identified needs, the Foundation generally does not support local service delivery. Instead, it sees its role as highlighting issues of concern, supporting research into causes and cures, demonstrating the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of particular approaches, and disseminating the results in various forms. In essence, the Foundation's work moves along a continuum from generating ideas to making them "actionable" in a variety of local settings. As will be discussed further below, in the case of the School Development Program (SDP) the focus was on the latter. The Foundation's partnership with the Comer SDP has aimed to spread a system of school change that had proven powerful in a small number of settings. Through this partnership, we sought to provide multiple access points to that system and to the theory and principles upon which it is built.

The assessment of the late 1980's reform terrain and funders' roles in it was made by the Foundation's then Vice President, Hugh Price. The funding strategy proposed by Price consisted of several approaches to reform under which one or more specific programs were initiated:

leadership and capacity building - team-based development of educators at the school and district levels

advocacy/mobilization - organizing and supporting minority and disenfranchised parents to become sophisticated education consumers and partners

curriculum and assessment - developing rich, engaging course work and more authentic and diverse measures of student progress

information and dissemination - creating tools to spread knowledge and implementation of a comprehensive school change method.

It is important to note that the Comer School Development Program was the effort targeted under the final category. For the Foundation, then, spreading the Comer SDP was conceived as a **dissemination** effort aimed at sharing the SDP message and methodology with exponentially more people and schools than Dr. Comer and his small staff of colleagues could ever assist directly.

The Foundation chose to support the work of Dr. James Comer, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry and Associate Dean of the Medical School at Yale, because it exhibited a profound understanding of children's developmental needs, and of the links between development and education. Comer believes that students from home environments and family/social networks functioning outside the mainstream of society are often at increased risk of academic failure in urban schools ill-prepared to address their different social, cultural, and linguistic needs. This leads to stressful interactions between students and staff, staff and parents, and teachers and administrators, often resulting in school environments characterized by anger, distrust, and alienation rather than the trust and cooperation necessary to foster children's healthy development.

The SDP is neither a "quick fix" nor an "add on" program. It is a process model that takes significant time (four to six years under relatively stable building-level conditions) and commitment to fully implement, and provides a different way of conceptualizing and working in schools from traditional norms of school organization and management. It uses structures and guiding principles to build a platform upon which child-centered teaching and learning decisions can be made and where more narrowly targeted reforms (e.g. particular instructional strategies) can rest. The Foundation concluded that Comer's School Development Program was the most promising and proven school-wide improvement method for low-income urban communities. The characteristics described above quickly placed "Spreading the Comer School Development Program and Philosophy" as the centerpiece of Rockefeller's School Reform program, where it remains today.

II. Disseminating the School Development Program

Dr. Comer's process for equipping key stakeholders to collaborate in furthering the academic, social, and personal development of children was for many years available to schools only through direct service relationships with the SDP. Prior to 1990, this meant that building-level teams learning about the Comer Process received training through the Comer office at the Yale University Child Study Center and follow-up support at their schools from a small, New Haven-based SDP staff. An early challenge for Rockefeller-funded dissemination strategies was how to reach larger numbers of schools without a corresponding increase in the size and ongoing time commitment of SDP staff.

Early dissemination efforts focused on creating partnerships through which local institutions (usually schools of education) would serve as surrogates for Comer's staff in helping school districts implement the SDP, and on developing and marketing a "how-to" video series and discussion guide. Partners are expected to provide training, resources, and expertise to support SDP implementation and to monitor SDP progress in the schools. When the partner is a college or university, it is also expected to demonstrate commitment to changing the way it prepares educators and youth service providers through the provision of coursework and clinical experiences incorporating the Comer philosophy and child development principles.

To support these dissemination efforts the Comer Project for Change in Education (CPCE) was initiated, with support from Rockefeller, to provide training in SDP principles and processes. The CPCE is an intensive district-level training institute designed to equip a core of Comer facilitators to train building-level teams in the use of the SDP and support their implementation of the program. The CPCE also sponsors an annual academy for Comer principals and follow-up development for more experienced facilitators.

By December 1994, $8.09 million had been appropriated for the Foundation's initial five years of investment in SDP dissemination. Specific uses of the Foundation's resources in expanding the SDP's capacity have included the addition of training, implementation, and research staff, and the development of training curricula, videotapes, and other dissemination tools. In addition, the Foundation has provided multi-year funding to a small number of school districts and universities in the vanguard of implementing selected dissemination methods. Local implementation is supported by multiple sources of public and private resources.

Since 1990, when Foundation support began, the Comer team has enlarged the SDP's reach considerably, increased its training capacity, and brought its relationships with school districts to a more sophisticated and systematic level of engagement. The SDP now influences management philosophy, governance structures, and school relationships in seven times more schools than before Rockefeller's support began. As of December 1994, the SDP was operating in over 480 schools in 28 districts, with the total projected at 550 by the end of the current school year. These

schools continue to be concentrated in urban/central city areas that enroll the highest proportions of low-income students.

III. Evaluating the Rockefeller Foundation's Dissemination of the School Development Program

In December of 1990, the Comer program was placed on the Foundation's list of major programs in need of evaluation attention. Foundation staff spent much of 1991 determining what, precisely, was of evaluative interest to the Foundation's trustees, staff, to Dr. Comer and his team at Yale, and to the larger field.

The staff talked for months about the right level of inquiry for the evaluation. Should we engage an impact assessment of the core Comer concepts? We reviewed the landscape and found there were a number of existing or planned evaluations of the core Comer model, one in Prince George's County, Maryland, the other in Chicago. Both were in able hands. The importance to the Foundation of also assessing the core Comer model thus became questionable.

Ultimately, we saw that the essential questions were: What differentiates the Foundation's program from other attempts to implement the SDP? What, if anything, was distinctive about the work we were funding? What uniquely could be learned from a study of the work we were supporting? Before the Rockefeller Foundation's decision to support the spread of the SDP, Dr. Comer and his colleagues had worked directly with some seventy schools in five school districts. As noted above, the direct building-level involvement with these schools and the small size of the operation (3 full-time professionals in addition to Dr. Comer) left an unmet demand for the SDP and seriously limited the potential for its widespread adoption as a school improvement method.

Thus, what made the Foundation's approach unique was and is an attempt to wholesale the intervention via dissemination - not by replication. The distinction between dissemination and replication is an important one to the Foundation. There were many internal conversations about the degree of fidelity we expected or hoped to find in sites adopting the SDP by use of one of the Rockefeller-funded dissemination methods. We understood that there would be local variation, and that variation was not only acceptable but necessary for schools to make the SDP their own.

The chief focus for the evaluation thus became the success (or lack thereof) of the dissemination methods in helping spread implementation of the Comer School Development Program to more schools. The SDP's own research and experience indicate that, because it is not a pre-packaged program, the SDP may look very different across settings where it is working. While the common denominator in the vast majority of SDP schools is the existence of the nine elements of the program,

[1] there is no single way a Comer school must look or act to be consistent with the program's intent. We do not, therefore, measure success as rigid affinity to a "perfect" Comer model. Yet to sustain desirable home-school relationships, student growth, and increased achievement levels, the attitudes, values, and behaviors that promote these conditions must be institutionalized, becoming part of school structures and ethos. Success on those terms is, at best, difficult to measure.

In ascending order of intensity, in 1991-92 the dissemination methods (also described above) supported by the Rockefeller Foundation were: the 14-segment "how-to" video series and accompanying manual; the Comer Project for Change in Education Leadership Development Program, (referred to as the "CPCE" or "Institute"); and partnership strategies involving a school district and an outside agency, usually a college or state department of education, designated to ultimately take over the role played in the past by Dr. Comer's team at Yale. Whether to include all of the methods, as well as the scope and design of the inquiry, remained open questions.

We held a series of meetings with prospective evaluators in the Spring of 1991, to elicit their views and suggestions. We received a few recommendations to re-structure the program as a demonstration. This suggestion was easily set aside, in keeping with our interest in local variation. We received other ideas, describing how we might pursue an experimental or quasi-experimental design. But there was one point made by each group we talked to. As one evaluator put it, "Everyone knows that evaluating the videos will be a waste of time. They won't be effective methods of dissemination."

The discussions were extremely helpful to us in sorting through the questions we wanted to have answered. But we were puzzled by the strength of the evaluators' convictions that the videos would be of no value. So, in follow-up, we asked a few of them to provide citations of research on the subject. We received none and a further search of the literature revealed no evidence directly on the topic of using video or television to offer technical training to adult professionals. Given Foundation staff and board interest in the application of technological tools for training and dissemination in various fields, we concluded it would be worthwhile to examine the video question. It was quite clear to us, however, that we did not want to hang our evaluation entirely on the videos. We also did not have limitless resources and thus were forced to make some tough choices about what else to include in the assessment, and what to exclude.

The partnership sites were designed to be the most intensive dissemination strategy, incorporating access to the videos, as well as training at the Institute. We felt it was important to

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[1] The nine elements are: three structures (*School Planning and Management Team*, *Mental Health Team*, and *Parent Program*), three operations (Comprehensive School Plan, staff development, and documentation), and three guiding principles (no-fault, consensus, and collaboration).

study the strategy with the most inputs (and the highest perceived likelihood of successful dissemination) and we liked pairing the least intensive and the most intensive methods. Although in an ideal world we would have included all three of the dissemination strategies then in place, we were unable to do so. Due in part to insufficient resources, and also because it would be under study as part of the partnership strategy, we chose not to include the CPCE Institute alone in the study. The decision, then, was to look at the video and partnership dissemination strategies.

Given the focus on dissemination to schools, we also chose not to include other potentially important issues in the evaluation. Excluded from study were efforts to incorporate the Comer method into educator training at several universities; to expose educational policy makers to the Comer philosophy; the effects of participation on the partner agency (university or state department of education); and the effects on the Comer team at Yale.

Early in 1992, we issued a request for proposals (RFP) for the Comer evaluation, seeking proposals to perform an implementation analysis of how schools and school districts adapt and adopt the Comer model in their own settings. We also sought a design for an analysis of the impact of the Comer method, as adapted and adopted locally, on: school climate; student attitude, behavior, and performance; and teacher attitude and behavior.

One point should be noted here. While the program was designed and in operation before it was placed on the table for evaluation, it was the process of determining how and what to evaluate that helped clarify our priorities for the program. Close questioning from internal evaluation staff, and external evaluation consultants, helped the Foundation to understand that the underlying rationale of our funding was not simply to spread the Comer method precisely as designed in New Haven to additional districts and schools. The evaluation process crystallized our understanding that this was an effort to wholesale the method, and that we were supporting the creation of new modes of dissemination.

We received four interesting and totally different proposals. The one which was the closest in fit and feeling to what we had in mind came from Abt Associates. They brought to the table an additional and indispensable asset: flexibility. Since we were unwilling and, in reality, unable to control local variation, we needed to be certain that our evaluator would be adaptable in the face of the rapidly changing and highly complex world of implementation of a school reform model. They have proven admirable in this regard. We have also been fortunate to have Tom Cook of Northwestern University serve as advisor to us on the Abt evaluation.

IV. Evolving Dissemination and Evaluation

Changes in dissemination strategies supported by the Foundation and developed by the SDP reflect the evolution of the school restructuring movement nationally. While the initial concern for the Rockefeller Foundation was spreading the SDP to as many schools where demand existed as possible, it became clear that intensifying the SDP within selected school districts would better utilize resources. That, combined with the growing national focus on the need to "scale up" school improvement from limited successes to clusters of restructuring schools, accelerated the development of two new dissemination strategies, launched in 1994.

The first new strategy reflects both the growing knowledge about how district policies can undermine the efforts of building-level educators and community members (particularly in heavily bureaucratic urban settings) and also concerns about the fragmentation which results from a profusion of project-based reforms within districts. The Foundation has begun supporting what we are calling "systemic initiatives" in three districts - District 13 in Brooklyn; New Haven, Connecticut; and Washington, D.C. These efforts have a two-fold goal: implementing the SDP in a majority of schools over a five-year period and, equally important, using the SDP to reshape central office relationships with schools and communities. Each district selected has a base of existing SDP schools and central office commitment to building local capacity to support further expansion.

Three regional professional development centers (rpdc's) - at San Francisco State University, Cleveland State University, and in the Prince George's County Public Schools - were launched in 1994 to strengthen the Comer infrastructure in established implementation sites. Two of the rpdc's are outgrowths of successful SDP partnerships; the third is the site of a long-standing relationship with the SDP. The rpdc's are designed to provide cheaper and geographically easier access to SDP information and training and also insure that both exemplars of successful SDP schools and expertise on how to create and sustain them are available regionally across the United States.

In December 1994 the Rockefeller Foundation's trustees committed to the second five years of what was originally conceived as a 10-year effort to spread the Comer School Development Program and philosophy. In the face of still-growing demand and the challenges of sustaining local implementation, the annual commitment of funds has been increased.

As grantmakers and school reformers we have learned a number of valuable lessons over the past few years about dissemination, implementation and school change which are not the subject of

this paper but very much influence our evolving partnership with the School Development Program. After five years of supporting SDP dissemination, the Foundation has a more sophisticated and experience-based understanding about the training and support required to use the SDP. We know much more about the challenges local schools and districts face in getting the SDP started and

sticking with it over the long haul. And we have a better understanding of the structural and contextual realities which hamper comprehensive, school-based reform --especially in stressed urban settings. Perhaps above all, we recognize and appreciate how much the Foundation has learned from our relationship with Dr. Comer and his talented and dedicated SDP colleagues. Over the past five years we have pushed, prodded, and challenged each other on questions which we suspect are not unique to our efforts: What are the tradeoffs between depth and breadth? How do you balance influencing large numbers of schools with deeply affecting a smaller number? What are the right levels and methods of implementation support and facilitation; when do they cross over into building dependency instead of capacity? How much should the developers of a reform method "let go of" or "ride herd on" its local adaptation? We don't yet have answers to all of these questions and even when we think we do have an answer, we learn something that challenges our collective thinking yet again.

Just as we needed a high degree of flexibility from our evaluators, we as funders are challenged to be equally flexible. As the Foundation's effort to disseminate the Comer SDP continues to evolve, its evaluation must evolve, too. We are now mulling over the hard question of how or whether to adapt the existing evaluation to incorporate the new approaches to dissemination described above. By incorporating an assessment of these new efforts at intensifying and strengthening implementation, we can contribute to two conversations: one at the national level, within the community concerned with school improvement; the other within the Foundation, where we are just beginning to look at the relative merits of scaling up for breadth versus depth.

With several different assessments of the SDP from multiple external sources and with so many different modes of implementing the School Development Program, the Comer method will likely be among the most widely reviewed whole-school improvement approaches. The Foundation is pleased and proud to have the opportunity to contribute to the dissemination of this important work and to the research on its implementation and effectiveness.

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